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ON THE

NAME AND ORIGIN

OF THE

MERINO BREED OF SHEEP.

By Mr Brougham

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TO THE

Right Hon. Sir Joseph Banks, K. B.

&c. &c. &c.

Sir,

PERMIT me to dedicate the following pages to you, as a tribute due to your public character, and as a personal acknowledgement, upon my part, that the names, of which I have taken occasion to illustrate the etymology, are derived from your instructive Letter concerning his Majesty's Merino Flocks.

I have the honour to be,

With respect and esteem,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

The AUTHOR.

ON THE

NAME AND ORIGIN

OF THE

MERINO BREED OF SHEEP.

THE derivation and meaning of the word MERINO being generally misunderstood, the following short explanation of the name, and probable origin of the breed, may not, perhaps, be unacceptable to the agricultural reader.

In the Spanish language, *Merino* is properly a mere adjective, and is only significant when conjoined with a substantive noun like Ovejas. Merino, however, signifies also the royal judge or superintendant of sheep-walks; and *Merindad*, the district over which his jurisdiction extends. But Merinus, according to Ducange, is an abbreviation of Maiorinus, ("Merinus, "vox detorta ex Maiorinus, Lusitaniis Meir-"inho, Justitiarius,") which, in low Latin, signified formerly the same among the Spaniards that "Maior Villæ," or "Maior Domus," did among the Franks. "Permittite me comburere "deprædatorem Sanctissimi Rudefindi; Do-"minus enim me constituit ultorem, et *Maiori-"num* ipsius." De miraculis St. Rudefindi. In the Spanish Consuetudines, and other feudal compilations of the middle ages, Meirinus and Sub-

meirinus frequently occur, as equivalent to Justiciarius; and Merinatus, (in Spanish Merindada,) as the peculiar district or jurisdiction of the Merinus or Justiciary*. At whatever period, therefore, the Trashumantes, or travelling-flocks, were established in Spain, it would appear that, when they became the peculiar objects of police, and were placed under the exclusive jurisdiction of mayors, with public walks and large districts allotted for their sustenance, they were termed *Merinos Ovejas*, the sheep belonging to, or under the care of, the merino†, or mayor, in contradistinction to the coarse-wooled, or stationary flocks, for which no such provisions or regulations were made.

This plain and simple explanation of the name, is confirmed by the derivation of other terms, *viz.* Mesta, Cavaña, Dehesa, Esquileo, from the low Latin of the middle ages, or rather from that provincial dialect of Latin which was peculiar to Spain.

Mesta is the same with Meta, Limes, Termi-

* Ducange; Adelung; Voce Merinus. Major Equorum was an office at the court of Navarre, Anno, 1034. Major Merinus, the elder, or first major, also occurs. Id. v. Major.

† See Sir Joseph Banks' Letter, relative to his Majesty's Merino Flocks: Communications to the Board of Agriculture, Vol. VI. Part II.

nus, (Concil. Hisp. III. 89. Ducange,) and in that sense of the word, the Pyrenean mountains were termed "Metæ Caroli," the limits of Charlemagne's empire and arms. Id. When public sheep-walks were, in imitation of the Roman *Calles*, appointed for the Trashumantes, the limits and boundaries of those districts became the chief subject of regulation and police. The laws, therefore, of the *Mesta*, or limits of their pasture-grounds, formed the chief part of the jurisdiction of the mayors, who held an annual council, in which a privy-counsellor of Spain presided, for the management and regulation of their respective flocks.

Cavana, or Cabanna, a flock of sheep in the aggregate, is derived from the low Latin word *Capanna*, a *cabin*, or stall for cattle. "Cabana, Hispanis est caula, aut mandra, ad minus ducentorum capitum. Latinis grex, vel stabulum; locus ubi armenta nutriuntur; praedium rusticum." Carpentier's Gloss. "Habeat prior decimam bladorum, lanarum, agnorum, et caseorum, *Cabanarum* omnium." &c. Ch. MS. ann. 1273. "Pro quolibet, grege seu *Cabana*." Ann. 1294, in "Tabul. Gellon." Id. From the sheepcot, that originally contained the Tarentine, or fine wooled breed, the name has passed to the immense flocks, consisting often of thirty thousand

sheep, that traverse the mountains of Leon and Castile.

Dehesa, the pasture-grounds appropriated, along the public sheep-walks, to the different sub-divisions of each Cavaña. Dehesa seems to be a corruption of Defesa, as Horda, in Latin, is of Forda, a cow with calf; the digamma F, and the aspirate H, being frequently interchangeable. *Defendere* prata a pastione, pecore, &c. occurs in Varro and Columella. " Defensa, dicitur ager, pratum, vel sylva, ubi " aut pascua, seu animalia immittere, aut aliud " quidpiam agere, quod iis noceat, non licet." Ducange. " *Defensa, Defesa,* generatim pro " loco pascuo, vel prato defenso, non semel in " Chartis Hispanicis. Hispanis, *Debensa* coto, " locus prohibitus." Id. The permutation seems to have been made from Defensa, to Defesa, Devesa, Dehesa; prohibited fields, exclusively appropriated to the privileged flocks.

Esquileo, Esquila, a sheep-shearing; a small bell worn by sheep and cattle; from the low Latin; Esquilla, Eschella, Skella, Tintinabulum*. The name has been successively transferred, from the bells worn by the Mansos, on the assemblage of the whole flock to be

* Ducange. Adelung. And this again from the Gothic Skælla, tintinabulum, from Skall, sonitus. Ihre's Gloss. Suio-Goth.

shorn, to the sheep-shearing itself; and from that to the vast structures erected for the purpose of sweating and shearing the sheep, sorting, washing, and packing the wool.

These etymological deductions conduct us to the middle of the thirteenth century, when the richest provinces of Spain were possessed by the Moors. But it is observable, that the range of the Trashumantes, or travelling-flocks, has been always confined to the mountainous regions of Leon, Castile, and Estremadura, where the Christians maintained, or recovered their independence, in the ninth century; which affords a sufficient proof, when combined with the name, that the breed was not originally introduced by the Moors, either from the opposite coast, or from the interior, of Africa. The preceding names are all derived, not from the Morisco, but from the low Latin that prevailed in Spain, before and after it was subdued by the Goths. The management of the flocks is peculiarly Roman: the *Merino*, or Mayor of the flock, corresponds exactly with the Magister Pecoris of Varro and Columella; a superior personage to the Opiliones and Pastores; and to whom the management and the health of the flock were particularly intrusted. The practice of destroying half the lambs at their birth, and of

suckling each of the survivors on a couple of ewes—of sweating the sheep before they were shorn, to increase the softness or weight of the fleece—and of conducting them from their winter to their summer stations, by long journeys, through public sheep-walks—has been derived from Roman institutions*; with this difference, that in Italy, these migrations were confined to the *Hirtæ, Hirsutæ,* or coarse-wooled sheep, while the *Molles Oves,* or fine-wooled flocks of antiquity, were almost always housed.

But the well-known experiment of Columella's uncle, ascertains the early introduction of fine-wooled sheep into Spain. Having procured some wild African rams at Cadiz, of a coarse fleece, but of an admirable colour, he gave them to some fine-wooled ewes, and the male progeny being again given to Tarentine ewes, whatever was propagated from *their* offspring, (apparently in conjunction with fine-wooled ewes,) united the paternal colour with the peculiar softness of the maternal fleece†. M.

* Varro, lib. ii. c. 2. 10, 11. Columella, lib. vii. c. 4. Dr. Parry's Essay on the Merino Breed of Sheep: Communications to the Board of Agriculture, Vol. V. Part II.

† Hoc modo, Columella dicebat, qualemcunque speciem quæ fuerit in bestiis, per nepotum gradus, mitigata feritate,

Columella, the uncle, lived and farmed in Bætica*, which comprehended the modern Estremadura, and as Columella himself flourished under the Emperor Claudius, the Tarentine breed must have been introduced into that province almost as early as the Christian era.

There are certain minute circumstances, however, sufficient to indicate, even at this distant period, that the present Merinos are not the pure and unmixed descendants of the ancient Tarentine race. Spain, according to Pliny, was distinguished for the excellence of its black

rediisse. Columella, lib. vii. c. 2. That the ancients were well acquainted with the principles and effects of crossing different breeds, appears from Columella's chapter on rearing mules: "They crossed the domestic ass with the onager, or wild ass, which produced a wild and untractable colt, like the sire. But the mules of his getting were particularly valuable, as they acquired the shape and docility of the mare, while they retained the spirit and speed of the onager, his grandsire. Nam ubi asina et onagro natus admittitur equæ, per gradus infracta feritate, quicquid ex eo provenit, paternam (maternam) formam et modestiam, fortitudinem celeritatemque avitam refert. Id. l. vi. c. 37. The frequent failure of crosses is also well explained by Columella, that notwithstanding every sign to the contrary, some unknown colour in the ancestor will frequently break out in the descendant. Quod accidere non aliter reor, quam ut avitus color primordii seminis mistu reddatur nepolibus, Id.

* Diligentissimus Agricola Bæticæ Provinciæ. Id. v. 5.

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fleeces; ("Hispania nigri velleris præcipuas habet;") but the province of Bætica produced the same red, or Erythræan wool, with Asia Minor*; insomuch, that Martial compares the tresses of a fair-haired woman to the fleece of a Bætic flock, and Solinus imagined that it was stained with minium†. These varieties had probably been introduced by the Phœnicians, from Asia Minor, where the Erythræan, and the jet black wool of Laodicea, possessed the highest estimation. According to Columella, the wool of Cordova, in the province of Bætica, was tawny; ("Pullus atque fuscus, quos præbent, "in Italia, Pollentia, in Bætica, Corduba‡":) but the Tarentine wool seems at all times to have retained the brown, or dusty hue of the Merino fleece. "Tarentum et suæ pulligines," as described by Pliny, must be referred to the superficial dusty appearance of the yolky fleece, as Strabo informs us, that the wool of Daunia

* Colorum plura genera: quippe cum desint etiam nomina eis, quas nativas appellant, aliquot modis. Hispania nigri velleris præcipuas habet. Pollentia juxta Alpes, Cani: Asia rutili, quas Erythræas vocant: item Bætica: Canusium fulvi: Tarentum et suæ pulliginis. Pliny, Hist. Nat. l. vii. c. 48. The black wool of Saragossa is still held in estimation among the Aragonese wools.

† Martial, Epigr. l. v. 38. Solinus, c. 36.

‡ Columella, vii. 2.

(in Italy) was softer, but less white, than that of Tarentum *.

It is curious to observe, that the remains of these ancient varieties of colour, may still be discerned in the modern Merinos. The plain, and indeed the only reason that can be assigned, for the union of black or grey faces, with white bodies, in the same breed, is the frequent intermixture of black and white sheep, till the white prevails in the fleece, and the black is confined to the face and legs. It is still apt to break out, occasionally, in the individual, unless it be fixed and concentrated, in the face and legs, by repeated crosses, and a careful selection; and on the contrary, in the Merino South-down, the black may be reduced, by a few crosses, to small spots, while the Merino hue overspreads the countetenance. The Merino hue, so variously described as a velvet, a buff, a fawn, or satin-coloured countenance, but in which, at least in my own flock, and I believe in all others, a red tinge not unfrequently predominates, still indicates the original colours of the indigenous breeds of Spain. The black wool, for which Spain was formerly so much distinguished, is still apt to break out occasionally in the ears and legs of the Merino race; in some flocks half

* Strabo, l. vi. page 282. l. xii. p. 578. Edit. Casauboni.

the ear is invariably brown *: and a coarse black hair is often discernible in the finest pile. The Erythræan, the Fuscus, and perhaps the Pulligo, of the ancient Spanish breeds, are precisely the red or fawn, the buff, the velvet, or satin-coloured countenance of the Merinos at present; and whatever was the peculiar colour which the elder Columella introduced, by means of African rams, into his Tarentine flock, we may conclude that the same successful expedient was employed by other agriculturists of Bætica, to convert their coarse into fine wooled breeds, and to communicate the purest white to the party-coloured fleece.

The original intermixture of distinct breeds, may also be inferred from other circumstances, affording, in conjunction with the preceding, all the evidence of which the fact is susceptible. Each Cavaña forms a separate and distinct breed †; and the Negrete no more resembles the Paular, or Patrimonio, than the Merino-cheviot does the Merino-ryeland. The genuine unmixed descendants of the Tarentine breed, would have preserved one uniform character in every situation; but the native flocks of the country,

* Shulz's Observ. on Sheep. Communications to the Board of Agric. I. 312.

† Sir Joseph Banks' Letter, p. 274. Dr. Parry's Essay, p. 344.

crossed with Tarentine rams, would retain their distinctive varieties, and transmit them respectively to each Cavaña. The lambs are invariably covered, either with a coarse wool, or, (in certain flocks), with hair, and in some instances, it is said, with hair so red, that they have actually been mistaken for young foxes when yeaned *. The only rational explanation of these phenomena is, that the Merinos have originally sprung from a breed whose coarse or hairy, and black or Erythræan wool, has been surmounted by repeated crosses of a purer race, but is still apt to recur in the first fleece of the lamb. In the selection of rams, the Spanish shepherds are particularly attentive to reject those whose tongues or palates are black or spotted, as predisposed to propagate a party-coloured race†. An English farmer has no apprehension of a breed originally and radically of a pure white, like the new Leicester or Lincoln, ever producing black, or spotted lambs, like the South-down, which, if suffered to run wild, would soon, in the opinion of some, become entirely black ‡. But the Hirsuta,

* Lasteyrie de l'Introduction des Moutons a Laine Fine, &c. p. 21. Parry's Essay, 346. Hunt's Practical Treatise, p. 40.

† Dr. Parry's Essay, p. 348, 403.

‡ Young's Survey of Sussex, p. 298.

or coarse-wooled flocks of antiquity, were much variegated; and a precept of Aristotle's, which every ancient agricultural writer has repeated, from Virgil to Palladius,

> "Illum autem, quamvis aries sit candidus ipse,
> Nigra sub est udo tantum cui lingua palato,
> Rejice, ne maculis infuscet vellera pullis
> Nascentum;"

has been preserved by tradition, among the Spanish shepherds, as a necessary precaution to prevent the breed from degenerating into its aboriginal colour.

That the Merino is a mixed race, seems to be farther indicated by the different management, and more tender constitutions, of the fine-wooled flocks of antiquity. Of these, the Grecian, or Tarentine, was the most celebrated in Italy, and the Milesian in Asia Minor; from which it is most probable that the race was originally derived. They were termed *Pellitæ* and *Tectæ Oves*, from the skins and teguments with which they were clothed or covered; and *Molles Oves*, not only from the softness of their fleece, but from the delicacy of their constitution *; requiring constant care, and unable to endure either heat or cold. They were fed almost always in the house, and though satisfied

* Tum ex omnibus Tarentinum est molissimum, &c. Columella, vii. 2.

even with brambles and the coarsest food, are described as a most voracious breed; insomuch that any diminution of their allowance, from the fraud of servants, or the parsimony of the owner, was attended with certain destruction to the flock*. As there was no sale for the lambs, nor any profit from the milk, of a fine-wooled flock, half the lambs were destroyed at their birth, and the remainder were suckled each upon two ewes; a sufficient proof, that they were bad nurses, like the modern Merinos, which are also voracious though indiscriminate feeders. The ram lambs were chiefly reared, and were castrated, and killed at two years old, when their pelts sold to the merchant at an advanced price on account of the beauty of the pile †; and from this circumstance we may conjecture, that the *Oves Tectæ*, or *Pellitæ* of antiquity, were kept constantly clothed or compressed with skins, like the black lambs of Bucharia, in order to communicate the same undulating gloss to the fleece. But the Tarentine sheep are uniformly described as an unprofitable stock, unless where the proprietor was present to superintend them in person, as they could endure neither want nor hardship, nor the least inat-

* Id. Pliny, l. viii. c. 47.

† Columella, l. vii. C. 2.

tention. The breed was adapted for meads and fallows*, and demanded constant care, when abroad in the fields, to preserve their coverings from being torn, and their fleeces destroyed. At home they required even greater care than abroad; especially as they were not daily conducted to their pastures. They were frequently uncovered and cooled for refreshment: their wool was drawn out or disparted, to prevent its being matted: and was frequently moistened with wine and oil: the whole flock was occasionally washed (three times in a year) when the weather was warm: their stables were frequently swept, cleansed, and fumigated; and for these offices a flock of an hundred Tarentine sheep required the constant attendance of a couple of shepherds†. In these circcmstances the breed could never have been very numerous, either in Asia Minor, in Greece, or in Italy; and must have been soon lost or intermixed with the coarse wooled flocks, on any general convulsion of society, from the irruption of barbarians.

It would appear from these circumstances, that the Tarentine was entirely a factitious animal, formed with much care and attention, probably by a proper selection in breeding, and

* Id.

† Columella, l. viii. c. 4. Varro, l. ii. c. 2.

certainly by every artifice that might attenuate the filament, or increase the density of the pile. The transition of such a delicate animal, from the rich meadows of Italy, to the mountains of Leon and Castile, and from a close confinement in stables, to a constant exposure to the vicissitudes of the atmosphere, and to an annual journey and return of eleven hundred miles, is as difficult to be conceived, as the removal of the Dishley from the midland counties, to the Highlands of Scotland. But the Merino is a migratory, mountain sheep, unfit for deep, rank, or luxuriant pastures; and its constitution and habits are so different from those assigned to the ancient Tarentine breed, as to confirm the supposition that the example of Columella was adopted by other agriculturists of Bætica, to superinduce the purest white, and the finest fleece, on their native, home-bred, or party-coloured flocks.

The beginning of this improvement seems to be distinctly ascertained by Strabo, who, dying early in the reign of Tiberius, must have been nearly contemporary with the elder Columella. He informs us, in his Description of Spain, that the inhabitants of Turditania, had formerly imported many garments, but that their wool now surpassed even that of the Coraxi, and excelled in beauty, insomuch, that a

talent was given as the stated price of a ram to breed from; and that they excelled also in thin fabrics, which the Saltiatæ manufactured *. Turditania, according to Strabo, comprehended the whole province of Bætica, from the Guadiana, on the confines of Lusitania, southward to Gibraltar, and eastward to Toledo; and the quality of its wool is explained by that of the Coraxi, to which it is preferred, and which Strabo afterwards describes, in his Account of Pontus, his native country, as the produce of soft and covered, or, in other words, of Milesian flocks †. Such high prices, however, as a talent,

* Strabo, Edit. Casauboni, l. iii. p. 144.

† My much respected friend, Dr. Parry, considering Turditania as a part of Portugal, concludes, from a passage of Pliny, that it was a long-wooled breed, the very reverse of the present Merinos, that was thus introduced. Essay, p. 397. "Istriæ Liburmæque, pilo propior quam lanæ, pexis "aliena vestibus, et quam Salacia, scutulato textu, com-"mendat in Hispania." Pliny, l. viii. c. 48. The *Scutulata vestis*, was not an open, reticulated fabric, like gauze or muslin, but was woven with orbicular, or rather quadrangular figures, like small shields; (Turnebus, Adversaria, l. xxiv. c. 19. l. xxvii. c. 24;) an invention of the Gauls, ("Scutulis dividere Gallia;" Pliny, ibid.) and the same with the *Virgata Gallorum Sagula* of Virgil; the striped and chequered garments, or tartan of the Gauls. Heyne's Virgil, Æn. viii. 660. Turnebus, ii. 14. Diodorus Siculus, v. 30. Ducange, v. Scutela, Pannus, Virgatus. But Strabo, who carefully distinguishes

or upwards of two hundred guineas, must have been produced by a very general demand for rams, not for the use of Tarentine flocks already established in the country, which could occasion no such competition, but for the purpose of crossing the indigenous breeds of the province, which appears from the earliest period to have abounded with sheep. The travelling-flocks were not as yet introduced, as the mountainous regions had been infested, till then, by the robberies both of the Lusitanians and natives, whom the Romans dislodged from their villages,

the two provinces of Turditania and Lusitania, would not have compared a long combing wool, unfit for cloth, with the short carding, or cloathing wool of Pontus, which he afterwards describes ("Εχει δὲ καὶ προβατίαν ὑποδιφθέρων καὶ μαλακῆς ἐρέας,) as produced by fine-wooled or covered flocks. Strabo, l. xii. p. 546 ; Comment et Castigat. p. 214. Having enumerated the products and exports of Turditania, its corn, wine, oil, &c. its salt and salted meats, as nothing inferior to those of Pontus, he concludes with two distinct articles in which it excelled ; its wool, now superior to that of the Coraxi in Pontus, and certain thin stuffs which the Saltiatæ manufactured, whom Pliny, however, has more accurately placed in Portugal, near the modern St. Ubes. Hist. Nat. l. iv. c. 22. But the joint authority of Strabo and Columella affords decisive evidence of the introduction of fine-wooled sheep into Spain, by the Roman colonists, about the beginning of the Christian era.

and for greater security, dispersed into cantons *. But the Moorish looms of Andalusia and Catalonia, and those of the Christians at Segovia, in the thirteenth century, must have been supplied by the fine-wooled flocks introduced by the Romans, to whom the vacant mountains, when cleared of banditti, had offered a vast range of unoccupied pastures, from Estremadura northwards, towards Gallicia and the Asturias. A similar opportunity again occurred, to establish, or renew the institution of, travelling-flocks, when the Christians descended, in the middle of the thirteenth century, to occupy the conquered provinces of Andalusia and Murcia. Whether we suppose that they brought their own flocks down to be wintered in the fertile vales of the country which they had subdued, or that they sent the Moorish flocks which they might appropriate to be summered in the mountains; the name Merino, from the mayor or superintendant of each Cavaña, certainly was not acquired till then. After that period, the travelling-flocks became so well established, that the Montazgo, or tolls on their passage through the mountains, from province to province, the Servicio, or tax to the crown, and the laws of the

* Diodorus Siculus, l. v. c. 32. Strabo, l. iii. p. 152.

Mesta, were imposed or ratified by government in the middle of the fifteenth century*, before the Moorish kingdom of Granada had been finally reduced. The flocks which Don Quixote encountered in La Mancha, were evidently Trashumantes; and I understand that the Spanish shepherds are still so dexterous in the use of the sling, that they never fail to hit a stray sheep with a stone, without regard to its size, or to the safety of the animal. The humane precept of Columella, "Nec unquam "telum emittat in eas †," was probably directed against the same practice among the Roman shepherds.

In this manner, therefore, the native breeds of the province of Bætica were originally and gradually converted, by repeated crossings, into the present Merinos. And in this manner only, can the immense numbers of the breed in Spain, and the hardiness of the Merinos, when compared with the *Molles Oves* of antiquity, be satisfactorily explained. A foreign race, of a delicate constitution, confined to sheep-houses, as in Sweden and Silesia, was soon lost or extirpated in Greece and Italy; but the indigenous

* Dr. Parry's Essay, 356. 377.

† Columella, vii. 3.

breeds of Spain, when converted into fine wooled flocks, have been preserved amidst every irruption of barbarians; and although the devoted country be traversed, in every direction, by hostile armies, six millions of Merinos cannot now be annihilated. The flocks that survived the successive conquests of the Vandals and Goths, and the protracted warfare of many centuries, between the Moors and the Christians, may be dispersed and scattered by the devastations of the French; but the native breed of the country can never be destroyed; and, under every government, the produce of its flocks and vineyards must always constitute the staple articles of exportation from Spain. Yet if Britain be destined to subsist entirely as an agricultural nation; if she can maintain her high cultivation, independent of a commercial intercourse with the rest of Europe; the same expedient that first introduced the Merinos into Spain, may undoubtedly communicate all their properties to our indigenous breeds.

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